



Cactus Ferruginous Pygmy-Owl in Southern Arizona

*U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service
Ecological Services Field Office, Phoenix*

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Natural History

The cactus ferruginous pygmy-owl is the rarest and one of the smallest owls in Arizona. It was once common to abundant in riparian forests, mesquite-cottonwood woodlands, and desert scrub habitats in the central and southern portions of the state. The pygmy-owl is still considered a potential inhabitant of low-elevation riparian areas in central and southern Arizona (where this extremely limited vegetative community still occurs). The pygmy-owl is more often found in highly diverse upper Sonoran desert scrub habitat, usually consisting of dense ironwood, mesquite, acacia, bursage, and columnar cacti such as saguaro. The pygmy-owl is often found in Sonoran desert scrub habitat areas along washes where increased abundance and variety of vegetation and potential food sources likely provide favorable habitat.

Reasons for Decline and Current Status

Pygmy-owls have been found nesting in cavities in large saguaros, mesquites, and cottonwoods. In the spring, females lay three or four eggs that hatch about a month later. The young birds are ready to fly approximately one month after that. Fully grown pygmy-owls weigh in at about 2 1/2 ounces and stand only 6-3/4 inches in height. Pygmy-owls are most active at dawn and dusk and feed on a variety of prey including small mammals, reptiles, birds, and insects.

As the human population of desert communities increases, habitats that support the pygmy-owl are being modified by clearing, urbanization, water management, and hydrological changes. Over time, such habitat changes decreased the number of pygmy-owls known in Arizona to fewer than 20 in the mid-1990s. Due to the decline in numbers, the pygmy-owl was listed as an endangered species in Arizona in March 1997. Under the Endangered Species Act, an endangered species is one likely to become extinct in the foreseeable future.

Although pygmy-owls may still occupy some habitats in portions of Maricopa, Yuma, Santa Cruz, Cochise, Graham, Greenlee, and Gila Counties, the majority

of known pygmy-owls found in Arizona today are living in the lowland areas of central and southern Arizona in Pima and Pinal counties where appropriate habitat can still be found. The Fish and Wildlife Service and the Arizona Game and Fish Department are working with a diversity of other entities to gain information on pygmy-owls in those areas where potential habitat still occurs. Current information indicates that areas zoned for single family residence lots of 3 acres or larger may continue to support pygmy-owls if nest trees or cacti are not destroyed, the diversity of the habitat is protected by retaining an adequate and diverse vegetative community on-site or nearby, and disturbance to resident pygmy-owls is avoided.

Landowner Information

If you would like to build on your land or are a government agency reviewing permit applications for activities in potential habitat for the pygmy-owl, we recommend following the guidelines on the back of this form, or calling the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service at 602/640-2720 before proceeding. Fish and Wildlife Service staff are available to help you determine if it would be advisable to survey for pygmy-owls on your property. The guidelines provided are just that — recommended steps at which there are decision points to aid in your determination of whether your lands might support pygmy-owls, and whether a survey to gain more detailed information about pygmy-owl presence or absence may be to your advantage.

Under the Endangered Species Act, if you undertake any activity (e.g., vegetation removal, construction, etc.) on your property or someone else's property that either results in the death of a listed species such as the pygmy-owl or injures it by interfering with its breeding, feeding, or nesting habits, you are at risk of committing a "take," which is a violation of federal law. The Service works cooperatively with landowners and has been successful in suggesting ways to avoid take of listed species while landowners conduct their activities.

The Fish and Wildlife Service continues to seek additional information in order to more adequately understand the biology of the pygmy-owl in central and southern

Arizona. However, until more complete scientific information is available, the Service believes the process outlined on the back of this form will protect the pygmy-owl while allowing carefully considered development and land use activities to proceed.

Habitat Conservation Plans

Development of a region-wide, multi-party, comprehensive conservation plan is the preferred long-term option to allow for the survival and ultimate recovery of the pygmy-owl in Arizona. In the absence of such a plan, individual site-specific Habitat Conservation Plans will be the means to obtain incidental take permits that allow landowners to proceed with their plans while providing appropriate protection for pygmy-owls. Generally, these plans describe the proposed actions and identify what measures will be taken to protect the pygmy-owl. It is the landowner's responsibility, with technical assistance from the Fish and Wildlife Service, to develop a Habitat Conservation Plan. Once a Habitat Conservation Plan is approved by the Service, an incidental take permit will be issued to the landowner.

The Service is actively working with all willing partners to conduct surveys and research so that we can better understand the pygmy-owl and its needs. As better information is obtained, the Service will take steps to notify the public. The Service encourages all landowners in central and southern Arizona to help conserve and recover the pygmy-owl.

For more information contact:

Ecological Services Field Office
U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service
2321 West Royal Palm Road, Suite 103
Phoenix, Arizona 85021-4951
602/640-2720
602/640-2730 (fax)

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service
Southwest Region
P.O. Box 1306
Albuquerque, New Mexico 87103
505/248-6911
<http://southwest.fws.gov>

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(See chart on back)

1. Is your land below 4000 feet in elevation?

and

Yes

No

in Maricopa County, outside the Phoenix urban area? *

or in southeastern Yuma County, bounded by and including the floodplain of the Gila River on the north and the town of Wellton on the west?

or in Graham, Greenlee, or Gila counties, within the Gila River floodplains or within suitable upland habitat below 4,000 feet in elevation?

or in Santa Cruz County, within the Santa Cruz or Sonoita Creek floodplains or within suitable upland habitat below 4000 feet in elevation?

or in Pima County, outside the Tucson urban area? **

or in Cochise County within the San Pedro River floodplain or within suitable upland habitat below 4,000 feet in elevation?

or in Pinal County?

No

If your land is not included in these areas, your development project or land use activity will not “take” pygmy-owls. The Service does recommend that your development or land use activities be environmentally friendly, preserving as many native plant species as possible

Yes

If you are in any of the above areas, examine your property for the following features:

Contact the Fish and Wildlife Service at 602/640-2720 if you need technical assistance in identifying these vegetation types.

Contact the Fish and Wildlife Service for assistance in determining whether your plan might significantly alter pygmy-owl habitat.

2a. Does your land have riparian habitat (cottonwoods, willows, mesquites growing along watercourses)?

or 2b. desert habitat (saguaro greater than or equal to 8 feet tall or containing a woodpecker cavity; or any ironwood, mesquite, or palo verde tree with a trunk greater than or equal to 6 inches in diameter)?

Yes

No

3. Do your development plans or land use activities require the removal or significant alteration of these habitats?

Yes

If you have answered **yes to ALL three questions above**, your development plans or land use activities may affect pygmy-owls or their habitat. Therefore, the Service recommends that you contact us to determine whether pygmy-owl surveys are necessary. Surveyors must have permits issued by the Service and must follow the survey protocol approved by the Service and the Arizona Game and Fish Department.

If no pygmy-owls are found, the Service believes your development or land use activity will not result in “take” of a pygmy-owl. However, if construction is delayed past the calendar year in which the most recent survey was conducted, the property must be resurveyed.

If pygmy-owls are found, please contact the Fish and Wildlife Service to discuss how best to avoid “take” of pygmy-owls or the potential need to prepare a habitat conservation plan before developing your land.

* The highly urbanized area of Phoenix, although containing remnant areas of Sonoran desert scrub and having many of the desert plants used in landscaping, is not considered viable habitat for the pygmy-owl within the boundaries of Bell Road on the north, Pima Road on the east, Southern Avenue on the south, and Highway 303 on the west.

** The urban area of Tucson is defined as south of River Road, west of Harrison Road, north of Irvington Road, and east of Interstate 10.